

'I haven't done anything wrong!' Melodrama and victimization in *Las 13 rosas/13 Roses* (2007) and *La voz dormida/The Sleeping Voice* (2011)

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Abstract

This article examines two films about the Spanish Civil War that feature victims as protagonists: *Las 13 rosas/13 Roses* (Martínez Lázaro, 2007) and *La voz dormida/The Sleeping Voice* (Zambrano, 2011). Drawing from studies of melodrama, the article offers an examination of the representation of Francoist repression through visual narration in these films, suggesting they use an affective filter that impedes audience's critical reflection. The article ends by discussing victimization and spectatorship in relation to Rancière's ideas of the emancipated spectator. It explores how the audience's experiences might have been affected by the fact that debates on historical memory, which were prominent at the time of the release of these films, were downplayed in both films.

Keywords^[1]

melodrama

victimization

Spanish Civil War

historical memory

audience

In recent years, films about the Spanish Civil War have featured the victim, a quite common protagonist in melodramas, as the main characters of their stories. The public wants to learn about the repression, which is central in the debates around the collective memory of the Civil War. Following an earlier literary trend, victims became visible both in feature films as well as documentaries, and because of the powerful impact images had on spectators, these films functioned as representations of their memory. Some recent examples are *El laberinto del fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (Del Toro, 2006), *Las 13 rosas/13 Roses* (Martínez Lázaro, 2007), *La buena nueva/The Good News* (Taberna 2008), *Los girasoles ciegos/The Blind Sunflowers* (Cuerda, 2008), *Pa negre/Black Bread* (Villaronga, 2010) and *La voz dormida/The Sleeping Voice* (Zambrano, 2011). Each of these films focus on the suffering of disempowered characters, portrayed as victims of the repression, which are seemingly vindicated as antifascists. These stories represent the effects of the aftermath of the war on civilians. The conflict itself no longer occupies centre stage, and epic and historical materials are not necessarily essential in the representation of the resistance to Francoism and its repression. It is emotions that carry the responsibility to portray the suffering of the protagonists of these stories, and to remind the audiences of the lack of a politics of memory in contemporary Spain.

Admittedly, recent films about the Spanish Civil War made a deliberate intervention in debates on historical memory. By turning to the victims of the repression, the focus of these films is now on the reparation advocated by grass-roots movements such as the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica/Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. It is unclear, however, whether this turn also means renouncing the vindication of

these victims as antifascists who were repressed for their deeds. Indeed, Mercedes Maroto Camino proves that filmic representations of antifascist resistance do not make a clear-cut distinction between civilians, antifascist fighters and victims; neither active nor passive resistance is a meaningful feature in the construction of these characters. Maroto Camino finds this sort of victimization unproblematic in the films she analyses. Rather she considers this fact a realistic representation of the documented cases of repression, given how Francoism defined opposition broadly as ‘those who did not support the regime’ (Camino 2011: 163). In my opinion, there is a clear ideological implication in the depiction of resistance as disempowered and passive, as well as in identifying antifascists mainly as victims of the repression. Films like *13 Roses* and *The Sleeping Voice*, which will be the focus of my discussion, present their protagonists as victims, as suffering heroines, but never as empowered antifascists. Both films portray female prisoners undermining their political involvement, concealing their charges in the void rhetoric of the repressive fascist regime, or never really going into detail about their ideological positions. In *13 Roses*, there is barely a sign of ‘the good fight’ in the depoliticized portrayal of victims, and their vindication as icons of the repression is delayed until the closing of the film. In *The Sleeping Voice*, suffering is so conspicuously present that it becomes the end rather than the means to facilitate an understanding of victimhood. In sum, audiences of both films are left with the visual narration of melodrama that drives them to empathize with the victims. Christine Gledhill viewed disempowered characters found in melodramas as victims, defined by an ‘apparent inaction’ carried out by a non-verbal aesthetic that ultimately legitimizes their positioning (1987: 30). Surprisingly, this feature of the melodramatic mode produces convincing representations of the victim. In his influential article on

melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser justified that if melodramatic representations of the suffering character are compelling, it is because the victim is placed at the 'social and existential level'. His account recognizes that these representations reproduce 'the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society' (Elsaesser 2012: 457). A more recent take by Linda Williams identifies suffering as the main token that allows what Peter Brooks called 'the moral legibility' (1976: 20). Williams describes this empathy with the suffering victim as 'the alchemy of melodrama's cultural power' (2012b: 527).

Ever since the 1980s, film studies critics agree that melodrama 'broke genre boundaries' (Gledhill 1987: 6), and should therefore be regarded as a mode or sensibility rather than a genre. On-screen, melodrama seems to be an effective mode for representing the suffering these characters endure and, at the same time, provides the audience with the tools to understand their hardship. But because of the nature of melodramatic excess and its overreliance on empathy, several of the films mentioned above may be misleading the audiences of Spanish Civil War films to focus on the suffering characters and forget about their antifascist fight, as I plan to demonstrate in my analysis of *13 Roses* and *The Sleeping Voice*. Unlike the predisposition to an emotional response from audiences of both films, which demeans political and ideological readings, my aim is to show that responses to melodrama are complex and varied. As I examine melodrama in these Spanish Civil War films, I look at the victim as the genuine protagonist of the stories of Francoist repression, and analyse the construction of such characters through melodramatic devices. The most central of these devices is visual narration and muteness – both as stylistic choices that generate melodrama. After examining the mechanism through which victims are constructed, I am interested in acknowledging the active role of spectators at a sensitive

moment in recent Spanish history, when public debates on historical memory were omnipresent and local audiences were not indifferent to this reality. Finally, I turn to Jacques Rancière's idea of the 'emancipated spectator' as a model to analyse active spectatorship and current reactions to these melodramatic representations of the repression. Both films deal with the repression of women, and are case studies in a new sensitivity towards the victims since Rodríguez Zapatero's era.

In the early twenty-first century, features that once defined melodrama films can now be found in most popular media, from action blockbusters to television series. The limits of melodrama have broadened and the term is now used across media, genres and national contexts, making it more difficult to identify the various pitfalls of the mode. As a 'leaping fish', as Linda Williams describes the melodrama, it is too broad a label to classify films. Her argument is that in current 'mega-melodramatic popular culture', certain clichés, once only recognized in melodrama films, clearly work across film genres and media discourses (Williams 2012b: 524). She recently summed up some of the features traditionally associated with melodrama to prove that the melodramatic mode is pervasive. As concrete examples of this mode, Williams mentions the use of suspense to delay inevitable outcomes, which ultimately respond to moral principles, as well as the excess of emotion, ornamentation and the use of music or spectacle. These features are no longer found exclusively in melodrama but are 'basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment' (Williams 2012b: 526), and Spanish Civil War films are no exception to this, as the examples I analyse will prove. Williams claims that even TV series, which have narratives that extend for an average of 60 hours, have adopted the prolonged resolution once found in soap operas. As spectators, we are so used to melodramatic features in the

media that prolonged suffering and delayed resolution have become part of our viewing experience.

Moreover, emotions in Spanish Civil War films can function as 'potential resistance tools in the struggle against enforced silence and conscious or unconscious forgetting' (Maroto Camino 2011: 16). Melodrama seems to rely on the contradictions that emerge from its potentially subversive mode, being able to challenge the status quo and the frustration that occurs in the final outcomes. Annabel Martín has examined the tensions between reaction and transgression in melodramatic discourses produced and consumed during Francoism and post-Francoism. Martín claims melodrama is ambivalent and emotional, and therefore 'moviliza al mismo tiempo con las lágrimas de consenso las fuerzas ideológicas opuestas'/'generates consensual tears while also catalysing opposing ideological forces' (2005: 74). In this regard, the processing of the melodramatic mode is much more complicated than a mere reduction to binaries, such as good and evil, which are usually brought to the forefront in order to undermine its subversive potential. On the contrary, the ambivalent discourse of melodrama impedes a consensual response from the audience; rather 'sugiere toda una serie de respuestas cognitivas, políticas y afectivas'/'it proposes an array of cognitive, political and affective responses' (Martín 2005: 75), which ultimately allows for an ideological reading of melodrama.

13 Roses and *The Sleeping Voice* portray real-life victims of the Francoist repression. *13 Roses* deals with a documented episode of the Francoist repression: the execution in Madrid, in August 1939, of thirteen young female members of the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas/Unified Socialist Youth – the so-called thirteen roses. *The Sleeping Voice* is an adaptation of the homonymous novel by Dulce Chacón. In her novel, Chacón resorts to first-

person accounts she collected while interviewing ex-inmates, as did Zambrano when he prepared his script. As much as testimonies and historical facts are present in both films, omissions and alterations clearly demean audience experiences. In *13 Rosas* there is no trace of the *Roses*^[2]' real-life defence of worker's and women's rights (Larson 2012: 6), and the problematic narration of the events makes the film walk 'the fine line between historical memory and denunciation' (Deveny 2012: 48). Because the inconvenient sides of the resistance and repression are left out, these films' narratives are constructed around muteness and visual representation. Emotions, resilience and any other 'unrepresentable material' are transferred 'into the excessive *mise en scène*' (Gledhill 1987: 9).

The Sleeping Voice opens with a sequence that marks the tone of the film. A group of female inmates pray in the dark of a cell while we hear the footsteps of prison guards approaching. The cell door opens and the guards call one of the convicts who will ultimately be executed by the firing squad, as we see later on. At first, the convict reacts incredulously, and then she claims her innocence because her only crime was to attend balls at the Socialist Party's Casa del Pueblo. We hear her sobbing, accompanied by a dramatic music in crescendo, while she defends herself; crying out to her cellmates, 'creedme, no he hecho nada'/'believe me, I haven't done anything'. Her cellmates ask her for a last act of resistance, begging her to hide her tears in front of the prison guards. However, neither this death-sentenced inmate nor some of the other characters in this film will stop shedding tears. When inmates hear the shots of the firing squad, their sobbing is followed by rage. This sequence finishes with a singalong of 'The International'. Both the setting of the opening sequence and the one in which the protagonist, Hortensia, is visited by her sister Pepita at the prison, depend on sound to establish the audience mood. At times, sniffles stand as the only expressive

resource of the characters, as when Hortensia and another accused listen to their death penalty sentence. Often, the crying makes it difficult to understand the dialogue. Sobbing substitutes the dialogue and is the preferred narrative device to focus on the suffering in these key sequences of the film. Resorting to melodramatic devices, *The Sleeping Voice* selects a non-verbal representation as the unique way of constructing the victim.

The plot of *13 Roses* allows for a choral film in which the voices of different inmates are indistinguishable. However, the narrative concentrates on four of the *Roses*, thus privileging subjectivity in the construction of the characters. The credits open the film over black and white photos featuring anonymous figures as well as the main characters.

Gradually, the photos turn into colour and we see Virtudes (Marta Etura) and Carmen (Nadia de Santiago) asking civilians not to surrender. In the background, we notice some militiamen retreating and then, through subjective shots, we are shown how they leave behind their weapons. Paul Julian Smith pointed out how camera work and the use of subjective shots focalizes the story, allowing us to experience what the characters do, and also establishing 'empathy from the audience' (2014: 260). This shot is repeated again as Virtudes and Carmen witness the arrival of Francoist troops in Madrid, as well as in the prison scenes, in which it alternates with the group shots (Smith 2014: 261). As Madrileños are re-educated to salute in the fascist way, both characters witness in silence how an old man is beaten for being unable to sing 'Cara al sol'/'Facing the Sun', the anthem of the Spanish Falange party.

Muteness is a distinctive feature of the suffering character in melodrama, and it manifests in different forms: from the inability to speak to the use of silence to express pain. Speech alone is insufficient to stage suffering in the melodramatic mode. In the first half of *13*

Roses, victimization is handled by the *mise-en-scène*, but anticipated in a much less effective way in the dialogue. When Carmen and Virtudes watch Francoist troops entering Madrid, they resort to their non-belligerent participation in the war as a self-indulgent assessment of their responsibility. A Republican soldier claims to have only followed orders to exculpate himself, and Adelina (Gabriella Pession) uses the same argument to support her father, a Republican sergeant. Blanca (Pilar López de Ayala) and her husband Enrique (Asier Etxeandía) believe they are safe because they are only musicians. Later on, they realize they were wrong, as they are indicted for lending money to a communist friend.

These examples pave the way for the moral legibility that melodrama propagates. Even though victims are singled out in the openings of both films and the historical context permits the immediate identification of good and evil, there is a need to articulate victimhood. As the action progresses, *roses* are detained, turned in and tortured in a series of scenes amplified by the *mise-en-scène*. Muteness, as a stylistic choice that generates melodrama, is used prominently in the scenes at the police station, which rely heavily on visual narration. In silence, from the top of the stairs, Blanca sees her detained husband leaving their home; later on, we will see her, already detained, walking down the stairs of the police station. Julia's relatives recognize Adelina, who has been turned in by her father, as they cross on the entrance stairs of the police station. Following detentions, tortures are thematized. Julia is the first to suffer at the hands of her captors. Policemen threaten to arrest her two sisters – one of whom allegedly has tuberculosis, as we infer from the earlier scenes – until she turns herself in, and is then arrested after leaving her hideout at home. In a disused kitchen at the police station, she is tortured with burning cigarettes. Some scenes later, Blanca crosses this kitchen as she is escorted to confinement, and we notice half-

naked Virtudes who has been whipped. The next scene shows Adelina, handcuffed in a chair with no signs of physical torture, as she is forced to watch how Cánepa is brutally beaten. When the torturers leave the room, she ultimately witnesses Cánepa commit suicide using a light bulb. These scenes make a dramatic use of lighting, which is especially effective in Adelina's scene, when shadows convey her psychological torture [INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]. The first part of the film comes to an end with the camera following a truck bearing the sign 'Presos rojos' / 'Communist Prisoners' in large red characters, fading out to show the same truck arriving at Ventas' prison. Sets, lighting, camera work and acting bear the responsibility of constructing victimhood in these gruesome scenes when dialogue is unable to do so.

In this regard, acting becomes a significant melodramatic component that is used excessively in the construction of victimhood. Both *13 Roses* and *The Sleeping Voice* rely on the performance of the actors – especially in those scenes in which dialogue is insufficient to portray victimhood – to construct a compelling story that is allegedly fair to the victims. In the melodramatic construction of these scenes, performance intertwines with the setting and 'the body of the actor becomes an issue in the film' (de Cordova 2012: 155). Ultimately, it is decisive in the audience's validation of the story. The result in *13 Roses* is an unconvincing performance of the *roses* that I cannot describe better than Vicente Sánchez-Biosca when talking about acting in Vicente Aranda's *Libertarias/Freedomfighters* (1996). He states, 'son mujeres de hoy en día, aunque embozadas en vestidos de antaño, como en una *película de trajes*' / 'although dressed in clothing of the past, they are women of today in a *period movie*' (293, original emphasis). Surprisingly, these issues appear in the scenes I have mentioned earlier that are set in spaces of confinement. One would expect these

scenes to be central to the construction of victimhood, and yet they turn out to be most excessive when it comes to the issues described by Sánchez-Biosca.

In both films, the trial is the turning point in the melodramatic depiction of the victims. In *13 Roses*, this occurs after some twenty minutes of prison scenes focused on the daily life of the prisoners. These scenes are mostly set in open spaces such as the courtyard, in which one can observe the playfulness of the inmates and their camaraderie. In contrast to these happy-go-lucky scenes, the trial is marked by the silence of the *Roses*. The scene opens with a long shot of all the accused sitting on two benches listening to the prosecutor's accusations; their faces, wearing flawless make-up, are carefully illuminated [INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]. They exchange glances as they listen to the accusations, and once again close-ups and subjective shots replicate the subjectivity that has been a staple in the film. Silence is only broken by an incidental comment by Blanca and a coral sobbing that begins when the prosecutor asks for the death penalty. As a central scene that initiates the closing of the film, it represents 'a vertiginous drop in the emotional temperature', in comparison with the prison scenes. Elsaesser identified this as a sign of dramatic discontinuity (2012: 453) and an effective melodramatic device to change the tone of a film, as one can experience from this point onwards waiting for the inevitable outcome.

In *The Sleeping Voice*, the turning point scene is constructed in such a conspicuous fashion that it becomes excessive. It begins with a close-up of the prisoners' handcuffs as they listen to the sentence – some are holding hands. After the death penalty is pronounced for each of the accused, cries emanate from the audience in the court, punctuating the moment. The sorrow is amplified once the trial is over, with the echo of the sentence heard over the subjective shots of Hortensia and Pepita, who blow kisses to each other. In this scene,

Hortensia is the only one of the accused who is not in tears. Her sister, Pepita, is and will be for the rest of the film, forcing audiences to empathize with her sorrow or to recognize its excess. It is the spatial separation between the two sisters and the articulation of silence that would genuinely make them the objects of pathos for certain spectators. [INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE] In fact, these melodramatic resources seek the implication of spectators since 'there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency, to impart the different awareness' (Elsaesser 2012: 460). From this moment forward, there is a discrepancy between the conscious siding with the suffering characters and what spectators expect from a representation of Francoist repression, which is concealed in the *mise-en-scène*.

In this regard, silence may seek legibility in these two films, and can even be read as a form of struggle. Diamela Eltit, talking about the dictatorship in Chile, states that in those years silence indicated 'an absence or emptiness that suggests a politics of survival and even resistance'. Silence becomes a medium in the context of the repressive state, as it 'allowed one to understand and be understood by others' (Eltit 2009: 1801). Interestingly, the performance of silence as an act of resilience appears in the prison visitation scenes, in which the inmates communicate with their families through a fence. Tensi and Hortensia turn to self-censorship in these scenes, knowing they are under the surveillance of the guards, and at the same time they are suspicious of who may be eavesdropping. Oftentimes, their feelings are expressed with tears. This may be a realistic representation of the situation in Francoist prisons, but that a representation of the repression needs to resort to these devices speaks volumes about our contemporary times. David Archibald claims that 'a film form which positively foregrounds the nature of historical representation is more

likely to heighten the relationship between the past and its cinematic depiction in the present' (2012: 20, original emphasis). Nonetheless, by adopting a melodramatic narration that resorts to muteness, victims are reaffirmed as such and audiences are prompted to empathize with their prolonged suffering. It serves the rules of melodrama; however, it disavows the revision of Francoist repression occurring as a result of the exhumation of mass graves being undertaken in Spain and the public debate created around the Historical Memory Law.

The Sleeping Voice is a story of grieving, embodied in Pepita. The first sign is the dedication of the film that aims to 'ser un homenaje a todas a (*sic*) las mujeres que lloraron en silencio en las puertas y en las tapias de los cementerios'/'pay tribute to all the women who wept in silence in the doorways and in the walls of the cemeteries' and those who 'murieron en las comisarías, en las cárceles o frente a los pelotones de ejecución'/'died in police stations, jails or in front of execution squads'. This dedication is relevant for several reasons that will be confirmed in the film. It posits the self-censorship of the grieving mother, wife or sister, and confirms that victimhood was not articulated during the dictatorship, or even well into the democracy. But at the same time it neglects the disappeared who remain in mass graves, missing in this dedication and disavowed in the film, despite the fact that Hortensia's husband is a disappeared as we learn in the final scene. It seems Zambrano was aware that crying would be a natural reaction among spectators of his film, and he argued that tears were necessary. In a press conference after the film's premiere at the 2011 San Sebastian Film Festival, he defended that 'llorar el arte es bonito, es lo mejor que te puede ocurrir leyendo un libro o viendo una película. Eso te reconcilia porque sabes que dentro de ti hay una persona que se deja doler'/'to cry about art is beautiful, it is the best thing

that can happen while reading a book or watching a movie. You reconcile this because you know that inside you there is a person who lets themselves hurt' (Andrés 2011). Zambrano recognizes that the film takes pleasure in the unpleasantness, and defends crying as a necessary reaction among audiences. It concurred with 1970s' feminist analysis of melodramatic weepies, which classified these films' consumption as masochistic, especially among female audiences. Linda Williams proposes a more complex model in which female audiences do not necessarily identify with a suffering protagonist, 'but rather with a variety of different subject positions, including those which empathically look on at her own suffering' (2012a: 169).

In *The Sleeping Voice*, spectators and other characters recognize Hortensia as a character using her endurance as an act of resilience, which gives meaning to her fight for her ideals; this we notice in the trial scene. Zambrano's expectation for the audience reproduces the formalism of the screen theory on spectatorship, which reduced its role 'to a purely passive and unitary product of the cinematic *dispositif*' (Geil 2013: 53).¹ Conversely, other approaches posit the active agency of the spectator in the reception process. All melodramatic devices I have mentioned thus far in *13 Roses* and *The Sleeping Voice* implicate the spectators, who may – or may not – conform to melodrama's pleasure, found in the reception of the unpleasure, as put by Michele Aaron. Following Gilles Deleuze's re-reading of masochism, Aaron describes it as an active desire 'enacted through or evidenced by this contrived staging of a pained prolonging' (2007: 60). Thus, crying is not to be understood as a passive response but as a consensual reaction to a sensorial stimulus in the film. What is at stake for my analysis of spectatorship in both films is how audiences consent, dissent, negotiate or oppose victimization in film.

Williams argues that audience 'identification is neither fixed nor entirely passive' (2012a: 169), and spectators do not necessarily empathize with the grieving sister, or the suffering mother, but rather with a whole array of characters, assuming they are heterogeneous. Looking at the character of Hortensia, we realize she is constructed in such a way that we hardly know what her participation was in the war. As the plot unfolds in a melodramatic manner, we have to wait until the hearing with the judge to learn the charges, succinctly described as being ruthless with Right-Wing people. Her political ideas are devalued and spectators can barely glean that she belongs to the Communist Party. While Hortensia is in jail, she hands out political propaganda, but we never know its content. Pepita's political awakening happens in front of us and is limited to transmitting messages, an involuntary act she performs not out of her own conviction but as a sacrifice to help her incarcerated sister. Other secondary characters engage in similar political acts that are not fully developed throughout the film. In this way, with the political activism undermined in the story, powerless characters – and audiences – can only wait for the inevitable.

If we understand spectatorship as a negotiation of meaning by active spectators (McCabe 2012: 46; Aaron 2007: 85), we should acknowledge the active role of those who look on, those whose agency is an emancipation of the rules of causality. Furthermore, more often we encounter a discussion on spectators and spectatorship rather than an assessment of the audiences. Even at the risk of atomizing the experience of looking on, it is a productive way to analyse the reception of these Civil War films, in which the ethics and aesthetics are deeply intertwined. This is the idea behind Jacques Rancière's 'emancipated spectator', which disavows the inequalities behind subject positioning, and recognizes the different

capacities of the spectator, who composes a new text with the information before them by observing, selecting, comparing and interpreting (2011: 13). Rancière advocates for a different relationship with the spectator, who abandons the traditional passive role associated with them. In this regard, he maintains, 'it is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists' (Rancière 2011: 17). Similarly, the idea of pathos is used extensively by melodrama critics to reflect on audience emotional involvement. As one of the possible audience reaction to melodrama, pathos is not associated with a passive reaction, as is pity. In Gledhill's words, it is 'a cognitive as well as affective construct' (1987: 30), and as such involves a conscious siding with the character who suffers.

Watching a film also includes listening to one's mind and body reactions, and not co-opting to mediation. After fifteen years of public debate on historical memory, Spanish Civil War film audiences need an emancipation from the passive role of ignorant spectators who are presented with scenes of suffering. What Rancière proposes is that spectators should 'learn from as opposed to being seduced by images' (2011: 4). It is safe to believe most Spanish spectators had been exposed to victimization, memorialization and emotions related to the victims of the repression. Rancière recognizes a cognitive ability of the emancipated spectator who is able to compare and interpret what they see with their visual memory, and by doing so process the images that are before them individually.

The emancipated spectator, or the spectator without qualities, as Abraham Geil calls them in his use of Rancière's ideas – originally devised for theatre performances – offers an insight into the reception process that 'severs the logic of cause and effect that would mark out a path from the viewing of a film to a given awareness about the world and from that

awareness to political action' (Geil 2013: 55). Therefore, the emancipated spectator represents a challenge to and a rupture with models based on passive spectatorship. In the reception process, politics does not ensue from art: both are intertwined as the spectator approaches a film foreknowing the world. This is the case for Spanish audiences, who are well aware of the surge in public debates on the collective memory of the Civil War during the release of *13 Roses* and *The Sleeping Voice*, and would have needed to reconcile their personal experiences with what was presented before them.² Therefore, in the process of watching these films, an emancipated spectator makes decisions that are both aesthetically and politically charged. *13 Roses*' public success – it was the third highest-grossing Spanish film of 2007 – defied the memory fatigue that cultural critics have used to explain the public's lack of interest in Civil War films.

As the spectator engages with the stories of Hortensia and the *Roses*, they face the dilemma of whether to acknowledge melodrama's moral legibility or to oppose the causality and react against the excess. The latter would even raise a doubt as to whether or not they are a monster, a person who sits through a film about Francoist repression and is not able to empathize with suffering. On the other hand, accepting the moral discourse of these stories is not more ethical, as triggered emotions, such as compassion or sympathy, are also problematic. Susan Sontag, speaking about war photography, considered them both opportunistic. Compassion, Sontag told us, is a passive reaction, while sympathy exonerates the spectator from being an accomplice. She added that 'sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence' (Sontag 2003: 102). Therefore, we are left disempowered and embracing the melancholy implied in the acceptance of the inevitable. In other words,

admitting that it is 'too late', which is in fact another commonplace feature of melodrama (Williams 2012a: 173).

If none of these reactions to the melodramatic discourse help us come to terms with the past, I wonder whether a rejection to this opportunistic representation of the victims is an apt political act in order to honour them. In fact, these films have functioned as symbolic representations of the repression because of the lack of an official discourse about the victims.³ Inevitably, filmic discourses co-opt the reparation that should be a responsibility of the Spanish government, and in doing so avoid presenting a Manichean vision of victors and vanquished. Thomas Deveny mentions that in *13 Roses*, there is a 'sympathetic portrayal' of Ventas' prison director, Carmen Castro (Goya Toledo), as well as a 'cold-blooded murder of the civil guard, his daughter, and his driver' by two maquis. He offers these as examples of the film's resistance to bias (Deveny 2012: 42). Interestingly, this anti-melodramatic aspect of the story does not detract it from a portrayal of victimhood that becomes self-indulgent. As there is not a clear-cut definition of good and evil, there is no politicized portrayal of the suffering characters. Nevertheless, our responsibility is to remember the victims in a way that does not downplay the ideals for which they were executed, and this is where both films fall short.

The final scenes are precise examples of the reaction sought in both films: a reconciliation with the past we should all know and of which we should all be ashamed. Interestingly, both films end in a similar fashion, with testimonies of the victims. In *13 Roses*, the camera follows Blanca's son as he exits the prison. He folds a letter and puts it in his pocket as we listen to his mother reading the content, which includes a reiteration of her innocence as the boy walks in front of other kids performing a firing squad game. The take fades into

Blanca looking at the camera and asking him – and us – not to be resentful [INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]. A title screen notes that all documents used in the film were ‘historically contrasted’, and credits follow.

Similarly, the last sequence in *The Sleeping Voice* features the testimony of adult Tensi, Hortensia’s daughter, who we have seen being handed over to Pepita in the previous scene at the prison, and is heard here for the first time. Her testimony focuses on waiting. Pepita waited nineteen years to marry her imprisoned fiancé. Tensi waited to look for her father’s corpse so that he could be buried with her mother. As she pronounces these words, we see Pepita watching how her fiancé is taken to prison, and a final take that shows us a picture of Hortensia and Pepita in the years of the Spanish Republic [INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]. Tensi confesses that her reaction when looking at this picture is crying as a result of her pain and anger. It is no coincidence that both films end with a testimony that gives verisimilitude to the story, while making clear stances that there is no intention of revenge, but rather of remembrance. This is done by relying on a melodramatic arrangement of the material, which includes a problematic selection of the least politicized *Rose* for the final scene and the innocent daughter of Hortensia, as well as the use of *mise-en-scène* to allude to a repressed reckoning, which avoids touching upon current events for Spanish audiences such as the exhumation of mass graves and the reparation of victims.

The melodramatic features in both final scenes seek to move the spectator, to make them shed tears. Crying is the effect of ‘the release of tension’ (Williams 2012a: 174), as well as a way for the spectator to distance themselves from the suffering they are watching. In the

same vein, because 'being moved' is involuntary, Aaron argues that it is not ethical, and furthermore, it 'is the opposite of reflection and implication' (2007: 116). The endings of these films do not help our reckoning. They are both set in a later time in which we watch the victims' testimony presented as non-mediated and valid accounts of their suffering. However, a blind acceptance of the victim's voice confirms what Sebastiaan Faber characterized as 'a naïve faith in the narrating subject' (2011: 23). Regardless of their melodramatic representation and the operations of selection that I have mentioned earlier, the final testimonies of Blanca and Hortensia are presented as confessions meant to be taken for granted. In this regard, I would like to bring to the forefront my initial reflection on the discourse of melodrama in light of these final scenes. The closing of both films hinge on excess and fail to acknowledge that melodramatic discourse is ambivalent, and hence resisting a consensual reaction from the audience, which would express themselves with tears, frustration or a different affective response. If this is the case and these stories of the repression are to be understood as interventions in the historical memory debate, they confirm a troublesome circumstance in Spanish cinema: that Francoist repression is a contentious topic that is safer represented through an affective filter that numbs the spectator.

13 Roses, *The Sleeping Voice*, as well as the series of films mentioned earlier, were responses to the historical memory of the victims of Francoist repression. Due to current financing shortages, which would make a period film unfeasible, these films seem to be the last, at least for the meantime, of the series of features dealing with the Civil War (Smith 2012). *13 Roses'* main asset was its capacity to reconcile with Spanish audiences hostile to Civil War stories. It seemed the answer was a genre film and a director specialized in

blockbusters like Emilio Martínez Lázaro.⁴ Nevertheless, Martínez Lázaro disavows the intervention in the debate of memory. In the director's notes, he wonders, '¿vamos a centrar la película en los hechos históricos, o en los personajes? Sin duda, la segunda opción es la buena' / 'are we going to focus the film on the historical facts, or on the characters? Without a doubt, the second option is best' (quoted in Deveny 2012: 46). One has to wonder what his choice of melodrama was appropriate for, beyond box office sales. The film is not fair to the memory of the victims, it is problematic as historical representation and it perpetuates a contempt for the audiences as well as a lack of faith in the ability of audiences to reflect critically on their past. That a film about Francoist repression should aim at educating rather than persuading the audience should not be overlooked. At the time of the release of *13 Roses*, historical memory was in the spotlight of the public debate and therefore, as Rancière indicated, a Spanish spectator was able to interpret this episode of the repression and compare it with their personal circumstances. Melodrama does not suspend spectators' political awareness when watching these films; on the contrary, spectators keep longing to be empowered by these stories. Once more, this decision was a missed occasion to reconcile the filmic depiction of the repression at a time when an intervention was most needed.

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Notes

¹ Laura Mulvey's 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' is probably the most representative example of this controversial theory based on Althusser's and Lacan's ideas, and the implicit assumption of a male implicit spectator.

² *13 Roses* opened on 14 September 2007 in Spain (Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte. Gobierno de España n.d.), a few weeks before the passing of the Historical Memory Law on 31 October. Similarly, *The Sleeping Voice* was released on 23 September 2011, when stolen babies cases were featured frequently by Spanish media.

³ The Historical Memory Law was passed with a divided vote by seven parties of different political orientation after an intense debate on the wording and interpretation of the text. Both the Partido Popular/People's Party (PP) and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya/Catalan Republican Left (ERC) voted against it for different reasons. In the electoral campaign that PP won in 2011, they promised to repeal it, but ultimately they did not officially. However, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy did not fund this law in the four years of his term.

⁴ Martínez Lázaro's films are consistently among the top-grossing Spanish films at the box office. Some of his films such as *El otro lado de la cama/The Other Side of the Bed* (2002) and *Las 13 rosas/13 Roses* (2007) were in the top three spots in their release year. *Ocho apellidos vascos/Spanish Affair* (2014) is to date the all-time highest grossing Spanish film (Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte. Gobierno de España n.d.).